

by Jim Lambert

The holder of the current state tiger muskie record — and the world record for a tiger muskie taken through the ice — offers his advice on how to catch a trophy tiger or northern pike this hardwater season.

Winter came late to the Berkshires last season, so when the ice did form, I was on my way. December 31, 2001 was a cold, clear morning with 4 to 5 inches of clear black ice and a light, 5 mile per hour wind with no snow in the forecast: a perfect day for hunting tigers!

It was around 6:30 a.m. when I arrived at Pontoosuc Lake. Pulling my gear along behind me, I left the south shore access and parking area in Pittsfield and headed north across the lake towards Lanesboro. The border between the two communities bisects the lake almost perfectly.

I cut my holes and placed my tip-ups along a weed edge and drop off in 8 to 15 feet of water. Since the ice was so new and clear, I suspected that the larger fish — which tend to cruise the weed lines looking for prey to ambush — would be in the deeper water. I've been ice fishing for 40 years, and I still get excited every

time I head out on the ice. This is especially true when I'm on Pontoosuc, and for good reason.

Here in Massachusetts most standing bodies of fresh water, whether dammed or natural, are typically called ponds. Pontoosuc is categorized as a "raised great pond." The "great pond" designation dates back to the Colonial Ordinances of the 1600s. It is a legal term in Massachusetts that applies to any natural body of fresh water greater than 10 acres in surface area — all of which, by state law, are open to the public for purposes of fishing and fowling. The term "raised" is applied to great ponds which have had their outlets dammed to increase their natural size. For reasons that are far from clear, we now commonly refer to many of our raised great ponds as lakes.

I think of Pontoosuc as a great pond for reasons that have, as we shall see, nothing to do with its size or legal status.

Pontoosuc encompasses an area of 480 acres. It has an average depth of 14 feet, a maximum depth of 35 feet. The shorelines are heavily developed, making the excellent public access facility at the south end a near necessity. Water clarity is normally 11 feet, but with a mud and gravel bottom, all it takes is a heavy rain storm to drop visibility to 6 feet or less. The near shore areas and numerous coves support an abundance of aquatic vegetation that extends to depths to 9 feet or more.

There are numerous species of fish found in the lake, including bass, chain pickerel, white and yellow perch, crappies, bluegills, pumpkinseeds, golden and common shiners, yellow bullheads, white suckers and carp. Trout are stocked into the lake in the spring and fall, as well as into the two brooks that feed the lake, and they too find their way to Pontoosuc. There is also a reproducing population of northern pike — quite a rarity in the Commonwealth — and examples up to 15 pounds or better have been caught here. Local legend has it that the pike were illegally stocked by fisherman returning from Lake Champlain in Vermont.

Coming down U.S. Route 7, which runs along Pontoosuc's eastern shore, they would supposedly cull northern pike fry from their bait buckets and deposit them into the lake. Whether this is true or not, MassWildlife has been stocking north-

ern pike and tiger muskies in the lake since 1980. The tiger musky is a sterile hybrid, the result of crossing a northern pike with a muskellunge. Due to its scarcity, great size and incredible beauty, the tiger is widely regarded as the premier trophy of Massachusetts' hardwater anglers.

Knowing that I'm an avid ice fisherman, you can see why I get excited when I go out on Pontoosuc Lake. It's one of only a few bodies of water in the Commonwealth where I can fish for trophy pike and tiger muskie at the same time. If these big esocids have lockjaw — not an infrequent occurrence — I can almost always find action jigging thanks to the abundant populations of other fish in the lake, and even catch my own natural bait to entice the toothy bruisers to take my hooks. Of course it doesn't hurt that the lake is only 4 miles from my house!

Cutting Holes

Catching big tiger muskies and pike through the ice here in western Massachusetts is always a challenge, but with the right equipment, attitude, and above all, fishing time, it's an accomplishment to which anyone can aspire. To start at the beginning, first you have to make a hole (several of them in fact) through the ice to the liquid water below. That may sound like a no-brainer, but it takes some thought. There are three basic tools for cutting holes in the ice: the spud or chisel, the hand auger, and the power auger. All three work well in given situations.



MassWildlife Sportfishing Awards File Photos



The majority of northern pike (above) and tiger muskies (facing page) are taken through the ice during the winter. The limit for both species, which are stocked on a “put and grow” basis, is one fish per day, with a minimum length of 28 inches.

The spud or ice chisel — the only hole cutter we had for many years — works well as long as you keep them sharp and the ice isn’t too thick. They are relatively light to carry, don’t cost much, and when the ice is only 4 to 8 inches thick, they perform very well. When you have to chop through a foot of ice or more, however — especially when you need to make pike-sized holes — they’re no fun, plus they make a lot of noise and vibration.

The hand auger is a better tool: it’s very light, relatively quiet, and makes a nice round, clean hole. Hand augers come in many different sizes to drill holes from 4 to 10 inches in diameter. The larger the size, the more time and effort required to cut the hole. When sharp, hand augers are fast and effective; when dull, they’re among the most frustrating contraptions imaginable. Even when sharp, however, cutting holes with a hand auger gets to be a chore and is hard on the elbows when the ice is over 12 inches thick.

Then there is the power auger. These are generally available in two engine sizes — 2 or 3 horsepower — and range in hole cutting size from 5 to 12 inches. Their chief disadvantages are their noise (think of a chainsaw), their weight, and their cost. There has been a lot done in the past few years to make them lighter

and less noisy, but they are still the heaviest of the three basic hole cutters, and they cost the most.

Choice depends largely on how often you plan to fish and what you are willing to spend, but as far as I’m concerned, the power auger is the way to go. When you’re out to catch big fish, you want at least an 8 inch hole; I like a 10-inch hole. A large diameter hole has many advantages. When you hook a fish that has a girth of 15 inches or greater, you need room to get it through. Not only that, but when the ice is thick, you will be attempting to bring a big, mad, fighting fish up a vertical “pipe” in the ice that can be 2 feet long or greater. That’s not easy! Finally, for a big fish, you may want to use a gaff, and that takes some maneuvering room.

When I head out on the ice for tigers and pike, I know pretty much where I want to put my holes. Here in Massachusetts we are allowed to use 5 tip-ups or combination of tip-ups and rods; in other words, no more than 5 hooks in the water. If I go alone, I cut about 10 holes first thing. Any time you start making holes in the ice, there is going to be some vibration and noise produced that the fish can detect. I cut all my holes right away so that things can settle down for the rest of the day. I figure ice carries

noise and vibration very well, and I want things as quiet as possible as soon as possible. I use a power auger with a 10 inch cut and get the job done fast, and I cut the extra holes so that I can move some or all of my tip-ups if I need to, without disturbing the ice again.

Tip-Ups

Tip-ups must have two things: a reel to hold the line, and a device to signal when a fish strikes. There are as many kinds of tip-ups as there are fish. They come in all sizes, shapes, and colors. They can be made primarily of wood or of plastic, and always have at least some metal parts. There are designs that suspend the reel in the hole or above the hole, and even round designs that cover the hole and can be stacked in a bucket. There are many fine tip-ups on the market, hence choice is a matter of personal preference. If you're new to ice fishing, ask an experienced angler or the expert at your local bait shop to recommend a good design for you.

I make my own tip-ups from a cross-bar design that's been around for decades. I use New England hardwoods for the frame, preferably rock maple or cherry. The reel is suspended below the waterline to keep it from freezing, on a vertical piece of wood that is held in the hole by a pair of folding cross bars. I make them 22 inches long so that even if there is deep snow on the ice, I can still see the flag when it goes up. The flag is attached to a strip of thin, usually flat metal called a flag spring. I use blaze orange flags cut from a cheap hunter orange plastic vest. You can also buy pre-cut flags complete with special clips to hold them to the spring.

I put a coil spring on the reel post/shaft between the vertical upright and the spool. This isn't a drag in the conventional sense of putting pressure on the reel to tire a running fish. It is there because when a large tiger or pike strikes, they typically hit very hard and run very fast. If there isn't at least some brake on the reel, this can cause the line to spool off too fast, causing an overrun or "backlash" that may snag around the reel post and stop the line abruptly. The result can be a snapped line, wrecked gear or, most commonly, a clean miss. If the fish feels a big pull right away, more often

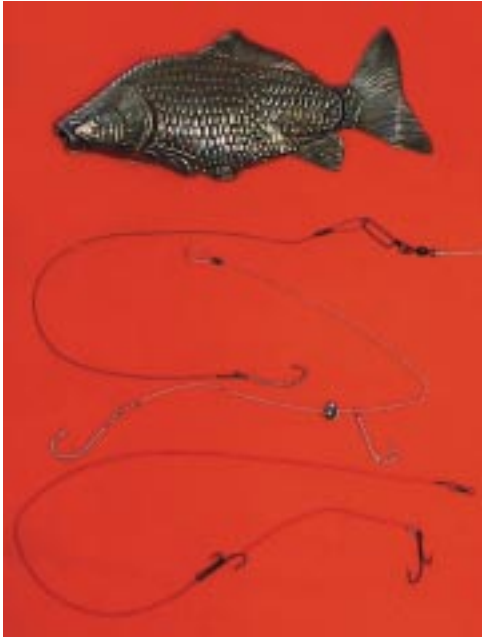
than not, it will simply drop the bait. Typically, when a tiger or pike takes a bait, it will hold it in its teeth and move off fast, then stop and swallow it in a leisurely manner. The time to set the hook is when the fish moves off again.

You have probably heard that small bait catches small fish. Well that just may be true in ice fishing. Think about how a trophy size pike or tiger feeds. They are big and need a lot of protein to survive. So they will go after big bait if they can. When they see a big fat pond shiner or sucker just hanging there, the dinner bell goes off loud and clear: FREE EATS! Big bait is also easier for them to see because it's, well, bigger. Pike and tigers will take baits dead or alive, and I fish with both with about equal success. Dead baits are obviously very easy to use. Big live baits present a problem, however: How do you keep a large, struggling baitfish from tripping the flag and spooling off line?

My solution to prevent this from happening is to fix a wooden, spring-loaded clothespin to the bottom of the tip-up, attaching it to the vertical post below the reel. The clothespin can be fastened on with a screw, or can be temporarily attached by wrapping it to the upright with a rubberband. When you set up on the ice, bait your hook and pay out line to the depth you want, then clip the line in the clothespin, leaving about a 3 inch loop hanging from the spool to the pin. The pin will hold the bait, preventing it from pulling off line and triggering the flag. When a pike or tiger (or even a bass or pickerel) grabs the bait, they will snap the line out of the pin, allowing it to run free off the spool and trigger the flag.

I mentioned before that natural bait — that is, baitfish caught right from the water where you are fishing — is best, and that is true, but I have my preferences. A tiger will eat most anything that swims or floats, including almost any fish, amphibian, reptile, bird or mammal that is available and will fit in its mouth. However, I believe a fat, soft-finned fish is the most desirable choice for bait. I have caught pike and tigers using yellow perch, pumpkinseeds and other spiny-finned fish, but the shiners and suckers, soft and spineless as lasagna, are best.

I have seen big pike caught on small baitfish. A fisherman from Pittsfield caught a 29 plus pound pike on a 4 inch



shiner three years ago at Onota Lake, another good Pittsfield pond (but which hasn't produced any big tigers yet). I, however, caught my world and state record tiger musky on a 12 inch dead pond shiner at Pontoosuc. Pick your preference, but I'm sticking with big bait.

Terminal Gear

Tip-up line comes in many varieties and test weights, and most fishermen seem to select whatever happens to be on sale at the moment. I say you can't beat braided dacron. It's strong, very low stretch, limp and long-lasting (impervious to mildew and very abrasion resistant). Nylon monofilaments are cheaper, but the no stretch/no memory qualities of dacron make it your best bet. I use 40 or 50 pound test, which I feel is necessary for big esocids. Tip-ups, after all, are not equipped with drag systems!

Ice line comes in different colors. I know an expert fisherman who uses green; another who swears by black; still another who uses white. I use nothing but white with green spots. Take your pick. I don't think the fish care at all, but light colored line has the advantage that you can easily see where it's going when you look down the hole.

The end of the line — the "terminal gear" so to speak — is the swivel, leader, and hook. A strong swivel is a must. It is

Pike and tiger anglers use many different hooks and terminal rigs, but most recommend big baits and wire leaders. The single hook leader at top is the author's custom made standard. Bait harness with fixed and adjustable double hooks at the bottom is a commercially made "quick-strike" rig, designed to allow for a fast strike to reduce "swallowed" hooks. Middle rig is author's custom bait harness, which he is experimenting with this season.

tied directly to the end of the main line, and you just snap your leader loop into it. I like to use a #1, ball-bearing, "cross-lock" swivel. These are big, but they need to be big. First, it's cold on the ice and it helps to have a swivel that you can get a good grasp on when your fingers are stiff. Secondly, a pike or muskie will sometimes try to plow through weeds to get away. A fish that wraps up in the weeds can add as much as 10 pounds to the overall weight at the end of your line — and that's not counting the initial pressure it will take to break those weeds from their moorings. In other words, when you try to move a large fish out of the weeds, you are going to need a strong swivel with guts. Don't worry about the size spooking the fish: it's above the leader anyway, and pike and muskie are not "leader shy" at all.

When it comes to leaders, I see fishermen using everything but string out there, and maybe some do use string, who knows? I use nothing but wire for leaders. While it is sometimes possible to take pike and tigers without a wire leader, it takes a very lucky hook-up: unless the eye of the hook winds up outside the jaws, the teeth of even moderately sized specimens will part ordinary line like scissors.

I make my own leaders, roughly 14 inches long, out of 30 - 60 pound test, seven strand coated wire. There are some good snelled hooks with wire leaders on the market — U.S. Line of Westfield, MA makes a good one — but I enjoy making my own. It gives me a feeling of being more in the game, and if one fails, I know who to blame. I snell the hook on the leader using a leader sleeve, put a loop on the other end, and use crimping pliers to finish the job. Then I test my rigs by putting a stiff rod through the leader

loop and hoisting a full, 5 gallon bucket with the hook. I give it a few good shakes. If it can pass that test, it's ready to go!

Hooks should also be very strong: a fish of 10 or 20 pounds or more, fought without any mechanical drag, can easily straighten a standard wire hook. A single, stainless steel O'Shaughnessy in 3/0 to 5/0 works well for me. I find that using a single (rather than treble) hook and impaling the bait just ahead of the dorsal (top) fin gives me a good chance of a successful hook-up, and tends to hook the fish in the mouth or jaws, allowing for easy release. (The "quick-strike" rig — a specialized bait harness with multiple hooks — also works well at avoiding "swallowed" hooks, but I miss a lot of hook ups using them.) I hear that a lot of fishermen are switching over to circle hooks, best known for their ability to minimize injury to the fish, and therefore hook mortality of released fish. I haven't tried these for ice fishing yet, but I plan to this year.

Best Bets for Glory

The following waters, based on their stocking history, production of trophies and current management, offer anglers the best chance to bag a trophy. Many other waters are or have been stocked, however, and may also produce trophies. For a complete listing, visit **www.masswildlife.org**, pick up a copy at any MassWildlife office, or send a written request and SASE to: **Esocid Listing, MassWildlife Field Headquarters, 1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA 01581.**

Northern Pike: Onota Lake, Pittsfield • Lake Quinsigamond, Shrewsbury • Lake Buell, Monterey • Lake Pontoosuc, Pittsfield • Lake Cochituate, Framingham • Quabaug Pond, Brookfield • Concord River • Webster Lake, Webster • East Brimfield Reservoir, Brimfield

Tiger Muskie: Spy Pond, Arlington • Lake Pontoosuc, Pittsfield • Lake Mascopic, Tyngsboro • Hampton Ponds, Westfield • A-1 Site, Westborough • Lake Chauncy, Westborough • Lake Quannapowitt, Wakefield

After I'm all rigged up, I hang my baits just off the bottom or, if they're present, just above the weeds. I try to get the bait in a spot that is clear so the fish can easily see it. Then I sit and wait. I know a lot of TV fishing show guys say, "Move if you don't get a strike." That might be good advice, but you don't have to move every 10 seconds. Give it a chance. Fish move, it's called swimming; that's why they have fins after all. You made an educated choice as to where to put your baits, so let them do their job and trust your instincts. That's not to say you should never think about moving them if there's no activity, but good fishing sense will tell you when to move your baits.

Incidentally, you don't have to wait for ice: I caught four pike trolling from my boat this fall. Just yesterday (I'm writing this in November) I had one on that straightened the hooks on a six inch orange and black Rapala! The fish left some pretty good teeth marks on the lure just to let me know who's boss. As soon as I finish this article, I'm going back for another try, with bigger hooks.

Getting back to my original Pontoosuc account, with my tip-ups set up, I was sitting in my fold-up chair, drinking coffee. There was not a soul on the ice but me: after all, it was New Year's Eve day. I looked over to my left and the flag in the deepest water was up! It was the one with the big dead pond shiner on, so I was instantly aware that it might be a good fish.

As I walked the 30 yards to the flag, I tried to be as quiet as possible. The fish could be swimming towards me, and with the ice so clear, it might spook and drop the bait if it saw me. When I reached the hole, I saw that it was, fortunately, running slow and steady towards the north, and I waited for the line to stop or slow down. This is when the fish has the bait — but not necessarily the hook — in its mouth. Trying to set the hook at this time will often do nothing more than pull the hook out the bait, resulting in a clean miss. Fumbling with the spool, or even having the line catch on weeds during this initial run, can cause the fish to feel something amiss and drop the bait. I waited for the line to stop.

After a run of about 100 feet or so, it did stop, and the big wait — the really hard one — was on. This is the longest period of time in the life of a trophy hunting ice



The author with his world record Pontoosuc tiger muskie: 27 pounds, 46 inches.

fisherman. The fish will either turn the bait and eat it, or drop it, and you just have to wait it out.

After what seemed like hours (really just five minutes) the line started to move off again at a good clip. When another 150 feet or so had peeled off, it was time to take up the slack and set the hook. I did just that. I could feel the weight, heavy, but the fish came to the hole without too much of a fight. Then it saw me through the clear ice.

It shot by the hole like a rocket: I saw tiger stripes and *big*, and not much more. The fish ran 200 feet of line back under the ice in a hurry and my heart began pumping like a steam engine. I got the fish to slow down and finally stop by putting pressure on the line with my fingers. I wear gloves for this with good reason: a big running fish can pull the line fast and hard enough to cut deeply through skin with ease — and I have a pike-run scar to remind me!

I eased and horsed the tiger to the hole three times before I was able to put a gaff in its gills and hoist the huge fish onto the ice. I knew immediately that it had a chance to break the state record, so I picked up my gear and headed to Porter's Sporting Goods, an official weighing station for MassWildlife's Sportfishing Awards Program. They put it on the

scales and it was 27 pounds even, 46 inches, with 21-inch girth!

Potential state records have to be verified by MassWildlife fisheries personnel. Upon hearing of my catch, Andrew Madden and Tony Gola were kind enough to come over from the Western District office in Pittsfield, and they confirmed my tiger was a new Massachusetts state record. They also advised me to submit a claim to the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame for a new world record. I am happy to report that as of January 2002, my fish was recognized as the official world record tiger muskie for ice fishing, tip-up class!

I'll fish many different lakes this winter, but you can bet there's one I'll always go back to: Pontoosuc Lake — 480 acres of the best tiger musky ice fishing in Massachusetts. It is a "great pond" indeed. 🍷

Jim Lambert is an avid fisherman who currently holds three Massachusetts freshwater sportfishing awards for northern pike, rainbow trout and tiger muskie, as well as the 2001 gold award for tiger muskie. He has been ice fishing since the age of nine. When not fishing, he is a chef at Canyon Ranch Health Resort in Lenox, MA, and is also a Commonwealth-approved culinary arts instructor teaching in Pittsfield and Richmond, MA.

